



Harris County Department of Education
Celebrating Impact
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Houston Independent School District

Harris County Department of Education
Celebrating Impact
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#TeamHCDE Thanks its Many Community Partners at Donor Appreciation Breakfast

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THE CONNECTOR

A Weekly Newsletter From The Superintendent Of Harris County Department Of Education

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MENTAL HEALTH REMAINS IN THE FOREFRONT FOR EDUCATORS THROUGH CSSS VIRTUAL SERIES

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► Colbert speaks to donors at the Donor Appreciation Breakfast

At the board meeting this week we experienced our mission in action through the presentation by our Special Schools Division. We saw students who sometimes fall through the cracks of traditional schools growing academically, socially and emotionally. We saw teachers running to students in crisis instead of away from them. We heard about programs that help students, not punish them. And we heard about how our partner districts appreciate the unique ways we support their students and families. These are perfect examples of what sets HCDE apart from other educational service providers.

This clearly demonstrates how HCDE is living it's mission to redefine the paradigm of alternative education. Our partner districts know the value of the services we provide through our special schools and other programs. I am proud to be part of an organization that instead of finding ways to punish students finds ways to help them see and achieve their potential. I look forward to seeing our programs and services expand and grow as we continue to find the blind spots in education in the greater Houston region.

I started the week with ELT on Monday followed by standing meetings with ELT staff that afternoon and on Tuesday. On Wednesday, I participated in the regular board meeting after which I met with staff to discuss the upcoming legislative session. On Thursday, I met with staff to discuss strategic communications followed by a meeting about marketing our programs. Today, I welcomed donors and partners to the Donor Appreciation Breakfast hosted by our grants division and the Education Foundation of Harris County. I then met with staff throughout the day to discuss ongoing projects and initiatives.

Have a wonderful weekend.

JAMES COLBERT JR.
County Superintendent

EDUCATION FOUNDATION AND CENTER FOR GRANTS DEVELOPMENT

THANK YOU: MANY WHO SUPPORT INITIATIVES, PROGRAMS HONORED AT DONOR APPRECIATION BREAKFAST



Harris County Department of Education and the Education Foundation of Harris County celebrated its business and community partners during the fiscal years 2025-2026 at the “Celebrating Impact” Donor Appreciation Breakfast on Sept. 18. Attendees saw how their charitable donations help fund programs and initiatives that serve students of all ages across greater Houston.

► **How could Harris County Department of Education and the Education Foundation of Harris County properly thank the many community and business partners that invest in initiatives, programs and events for students ranging from young children to adult learners?**

It started with a simple idea. Then that one small thought grew legs and ran.

Through conversations between Joyce Akins, the Director Harris County Department of Education’s (HCDE) Center for Grants Development, and Trina Silva, Education Foundation and Partnerships Director, the final result was the “Celebrating Impact” Donor Appreciation Breakfast. Held Sept. 18, hundreds of Department advocates filled the Irvington Conference Center for a morning of fellowship, networking, good food and the chance to not only see all HCDE does to fill in the gaps in education, but how partners and funds make the opportunities possible.

In addition to attendees, several HCDE divisions that collaborate with community partners to serve students and families across Harris County also hosted display tables.

“We pride ourselves on being the seekers of the blind spots some of these tables that you see around here today address exactly that,” Superintendent James Colbert Jr. said in his welcome remarks to the room. “There are many populations in not only Harris County but throughout the country that don’t get much advocacy, so we try to become their advocates.

“And it’s the spectrum. It’s everything from a young child that was born into generational poverty all the way up to our ‘reluctant’ learners who don’t necessarily value what you might be teaching in a class, to even adult education where we have people who come back to get their GED equivalent at the age of 60.”

Donors were gifted encased certificates of appreciation, each featuring student selected artwork on the backside. The pieces were among top finishers at the 2026 Scholastic Art & Writing Awards – HCDE serves as the second-largest regional affiliate for the prestigious scholarship and recognition program.

They also heard how funds raised support initiatives within Head Start, the Center for Educator Success (CES), and the Center for Afterschool, Summer and Enrichment (CASE) for Kids.

For Head Start, the SuperMENTors program not only fosters a joy for reading to some of Harris County’s youngest learners – they receive copies of each book during the school year – but connects these 3- and 4-year-olds with a male role model who is present and committed to their success.

CONTINUE ON P.4



Board President Richard Cantu, left, poses with fellow Trustee Eric Dick, who was honored as a top individual donor.

“What a joy it’s been these last few years to walk into a room and be bum-rushed by little children with a hug and them saying, ‘You’re back,’” said Journey of Faith Pastor Stephen Goldsmith, a SuperMENTor at Humble Head Start, which shares the same site as the church. “We see more women in the classroom so for this opportunity for children to be exposed to male mentors and community partners making a significant impact outside of their classroom, that’s a great thing for SuperMENTors.”

A CES video showcased the Early Childhood Winter Conference, explaining how more than 1,000 educators spent the day learning new strategies and hands-on activities to take back to their respective early childhood learning centers.

CASE for Kids Senior Director Dr. Lisa Caruthers introduced Taylor Baker, a teacher and Ecobot educator at Tice Elementary School in Galena Park Independent School District. The All-Earth Ecobot Challenge exposed hundreds of students across Harris County to robotics, coding and critical thinking, all while helping solve real-world problems in the competition.

“To me, the best thing about Ecobot is seeing students who may struggle in traditional academics discover that they can create, collaborate and excel,” said Baker, who has led Tice students in the challenge for five years. “The impact on our students has been profound. They’ve learned how to work through failure, think critically and believe in themselves. As a teacher, Ecobot reminds me just how important hands-on learning can be.”

Each group of donors were recognized, starting with “Friends” and moving up to “Advocates,” “Partners” and “Champions.”



Board First Vice President Dr. Erica Davis is recognized at the Donor Appreciation Breakfast.



VIEW VIDEO

Top individual, corporate donors and community partners were also highlighted. Among the top individuals were Board Trustee Eric Dick and Donna Cole, this year’s EFHC Heart of Education Champion Award recipient.

CenterPoint Energy Foundation, H-E-B Tournament of Champions Charitable Trust and Versa Creative were the top business partners honored, while the Henderson Foundation, Houston Endowment Inc. and TDECU Cares Foundation were top community partners.

“As Mr. Colbert said, we look for those blind spots,” said Board President Richard Cantu, who also serves on the EFHC Board of Directors. “We look for those neighborhoods where it’s not going on and it’s really needed. With your help, whether it’s a personal donation, corporate gift or longstanding support from foundations in this community, it’s all making a tremendous difference in keeping kids off the street, keeping them coming to school, wanting to learn and being successful in life. We couldn’t do it without and we appreciate you.” ★



VIEW PHOTO GALLERY



HASPRA, JOURNALISTS BUILD CONNECTIONS AT ANNUAL 'MEET THE PRESS' LUNCHEON

Nearly a dozen members of local media and nearly 100 school district communication professionals met Sept. 17 for the annual "Meet the Press" luncheon hosted by the Houston Area School Public Relations Association (HASPRA) and Harris County Department of Education (HCDE). The event is an opportunity for journalists and district personnel to establish or improve media partnerships, discuss education coverage across the region and maintain connections throughout the year.

A panel discussion featuring reporters Dayna Hayman (FOX 26 Houston), Jill Karnicki (Houston Chronicle) and Megan Menchaca (The Texas Tribune) discussed broadcast and print news opportunities and shared best practices on marketing story

ideas and communicating with outlets during a crisis. New this year, district professionals received dedicated face-to-face time with members of the media to pitch stories about upcoming events, groundbreakings and community points of interest. Attendees also included representatives from the Houston Business Journal and Telemundo.

HASPRA members meet monthly across the greater Houston to network, share innovative strategies and draw support from colleagues who face similar challenges in school communications. The September meeting hosting by HCDE sets the tone for the year by ensuring school communicators have media support when trying to inform their communities about student success, new programs and safety concerns. ★

VIEW PHOTO GALLERY



#TEAMHCDE HELPS TURNS RECENT ACCOUNTABILITY DATA TO STRATEGIC ACTION AT IMPACT SUMMIT



Joining fellow educational and research leaders across the region, Harris County Department of Education's Center for Educator Success (CES) and Research & Evaluation Institute (REI) were on hand to analyze recently released school district accountability ratings, explore evidence-based strategies and see the next steps for district and campus leaders to support stronger student success and organizational performance.

At the Accountability Summit, held Sept. 15 at Region 4 Education Service Center, district and school leaders were able to dive into ratings, published last month by the Texas Education Agency. Breakout sessions allowed attendees to better identify and understand areas of growth, collaborate with fellow leaders and form an actionable plan to increase performance.

REI and CES are both vital allies for school districts and organizations during this stage. REI can offer cost-effective programs and evaluations to help school leadership centralize information and produce attainable outcomes, while CES grows and cultivates high-quality teachers and school leaders through district partnerships and specialized alternative teacher certification. ★



HOUSTON OPEN'S BIRDIES FOR CHARITY ONCE AGAIN GIVES HCDE STAFF OPPORTUNITY TO SUPPORT EDUCATION FOUNDATION OF HARRIS COUNTY



After #TeamHCDE helped raise more than \$67,000 to support the Education Foundation of Harris County (EFHC), staff members will once again have the opportunity to support Harris County Department of Education's (HCDE) philanthropic arm and its initiatives through the Texas Children's Houston Open.

Officially kicked off at the start of the month, the fundraising campaign helps highlight the city's professional golf tour stop and

Birdies for Charity program. Our nonprofit organizations like EFHC use the Houston Open as leverage to generate donations, receiving 100% of funds raised in addition to a guaranteed 10% match. The Houston Open is scheduled for March 25-28.

HCDE raised **\$58,561.75** in the program **last year** and earned \$8,532.45 through the bonus match – a sponsorship from Chevron allowed the Houston Astros Golf Foundation to increase the match,

bringing the total to

\$67,094^{.20}



CENTER FOR EDUCATOR SUCCESS HOSTS EXAM WORKSHOP FOR ALTERNATIVE TEACHER CERTIFICATION CANDIDATES

The road to becoming a teacher comes with plenty of milestones, but sometimes you need a little extra help to get there. On Sept. 12, more than 70 alternative-teacher certification candidates attended the "Pathways to Pass: Teacher Certification Exam Workshop" to review certification content and practical test-taking strategies. Hosted by the Center for Educator Success (CES) and in partnership with the National Literacy Institute, #TeamHCDE provided targeted tutoring in core subjects such as math and science, helped educators combat test anxiety, and guided them in creating individualized study plans ahead of their exams. Candidates who hail from the Alief, Channelview, Houston and Sheldon independent school districts, as well as various educator preparation programs, will take certification exams in the coming weeks. By equipping candidates with tools to move through the certification process, CES is helping remove barriers between aspiring educators and the classroom while supporting school district efforts to build a strong regional educator pipeline. 🌟



'LET'S TALK MENTAL HEALTH SERIES' ENTERS SECOND YEAR WITH NEW DISCUSSIONS, RESOURCES

The Center for Safe and Secure Schools continues to keep mental health at the forefront of academic discussions. The "Let's Talk Mental Health Series," co-founded by Climate and Culture Specialists Michelle Calhoun and Dr. Tiffany Chaney in 2025, provides educators and professionals with a consistent space to care for their well-being while learning from experts and their colleagues' experiences.

On Sept. 17, the pair welcomed attendees to the "Reset the Nervous System Before the Year Begins" session, which explored how to identify early stress signals and normalize mental health conversations before challenges escalate. The series, which averaged about 40 attendees a month in its first year, continues throughout the school year. Session topics emerged from consistent requests for tools and strategies surrounding stress, regulation, burnout prevention and more.

"Mental health remains a critical part of school safety and overall wellness," Chaney explained. "Continuing this series allows us to help decrease stigma, strengthen early-intervention awareness, and ultimately save lives, while ensuring educators and mental health professionals have ongoing opportunities to sharpen their skills and expand their toolkits to better support their community."



2026/2027
Mental Health
Series



60-minute sessions, beginning at 11:00 A.M.
Real Conversations. Practical Strategies. Lasting Impact.

 Wired, Worthy & Brilliantly Different: Reframing Neurodiversity as Strength October 8	 Supporting Others Without Losing Yourself: Care Without Collapse November 5
 Joy, Grief, and Everything In Between: Navigating the Emotional Weight of the Holidays December 3	 Quiet Doubt, Loud Impact: Overcoming What We Don't Always Say Out Loud January 14

Though the series is designed with educators in mind, it is open to parents and students seeking a better understanding of emotional well-being. Attendees who work in education will receive one continuing education hour per month, making the series a resource for personal and professional development.

Learn more about upcoming sessions and [register here](#). 

#TEAMHCDE CELEBRATES PEOPLE WHO SHAPED THEIR STORIES FOR HISPANIC HERITAGE MONTH

 **VIEW VIDEO**



The average person will meet roughly 80,000 people in his or her lifetime, but only a few will stand out as someone who made a profound impact on one's life. In honor of Hispanic Heritage Month, Harris County Department of Education (HCDE) is celebrating the people and traditions that have helped shape the lives of #TeamHCDE.

Board President Richard Cantu and Trustee Amy Hinojosa were among several featured in a video published by the Department's Communications and Creative Services division. Cantu spoke about a former city council member who inspired him to join local politics, while Hinojosa emphasized the traditions and love for her Hispanic roots instilled by her parents. The video also highlights four employees from various backgrounds who paid homage to the communities that raised them, the teachers who left lasting impressions on their academic success, and the clients who inspired them to continue working in education. The piece will be posted on the Department's social media channels throughout the month.

Observed annually from Sept. 15 to Oct. 15, Hispanic Heritage Month recognizes the invaluable contributions of the vibrant histories, traditions and values of people whose ancestors came from Spain, Mexico, the Caribbean and Central and South America. HCDE is proud to join the nation in celebrating the lasting impact of Latino and Hispanic Americans on society. 

UPCOMING EVENTS

OCTOBER

8-11

TASA/TASB txEDCON

21

Board Meeting

22

Choice Partners Nutrition Show

23

Healthy Minds, Healthy Families Conference

NOVEMBER

3

Election Day

18

Board Meeting

BOARD OF TRUSTEES



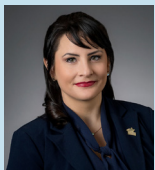
Richard Cantu
Board President



Dr. Erica Davis
1st Vice President



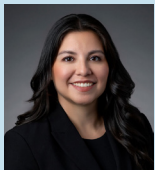
Dr. John McGee
2nd Vice President



Andrea Duhon
Position 2, Precinct 4



Eric Dick
Position 4, Precinct 3



Amy Hinojosa
Position 1, Precinct 2



Silky Joshi-Malik
Position 7, At-Large

DYNAMIC STRATEGY: EXCEPTIONAL PROGRAMS



► Appreciation goes a long way.

So as Harris County Department of Education and the Education Foundation of Harris County push forward every day to best serve students of all ages through countless program and initiatives, I can't say thank you enough to the many community and business partners who help #TeamHCDE make everything possible. We honored those many individuals, organizations and businesses on Sept. 18 at the "Celebrating Impact" Donor Appreciation Breakfast.

It was amazing to see a packed room, which indeed shows the impact our partners are making to help HCDE, and its divisions offer educational programs and resources to communities across the region, many of which simply wouldn't have access otherwise.

We heard testimonials from our SuperMENTors initiative and Ecobot Challenge, reinforcing why we strive to continue these programs. The Early Childhood Winter Conference was also highlighted – we celebrated four decades of helping educators best serve students last January.

Thank you again to all the donors. Your investment in Harris County students and communities will make a difference for everyone. ★